

A Mess of Momma's Barbeque by ej_writer

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Relationships: Billy Hargrove & Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Neil Hargrove & Maxine "Max" Mayfield

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Summary:

Max misses her brother.

A Mess of Momma's Barbeque

Everyone likes to pretend Billy was never even there. Life goes on, people change, the past gets forgotten.

A year isn't enough time for Max though. Right now it feels like the rest of her life wouldn't be enough time, but Neil and Susan, they were doing just fine.

It's almost like they *like* not having him around, that extra burden they couldn't shake. The plan only Max knew was that Billy was going to stay at home until she was old enough to go with him so she'd be safe.

She knew he was fed up and looking at some local apartments within walking distance of Cherry Lane anyways, but then July happened, and Billy died.

Now it's July again, and her hair is in twin braids of red with pure white ribbons on the end, and her and her mother are wearing matching blouses. There's bruises under the bangle on her mothers wrist and one under Max's own sleeve, and she just wants her brother back.

It's a holiday they told her, her father (he's not her fucking father, they never made her call him that when Billy was around) is a veteran, they *have* to celebrate. Better just dry her eyes and get over it.

Her mother invites all the family they have in the area over to their house for a little get together picnic, and they do their little happy family routine for a while, but Max can only handle so much of it.

Billy should be here by her side, flicking watermelon seeds at her face and putting ice cubes from the cooler down the back of her shirt, being an asshole to distract her from the reality of her family.

And that was that she didn't really have one, a family. It was always just her and Billy.

Even at these events made for bonding with family, they were off to the side, messing around while the adults talked like they weren't even there, and she knew she was a little naive then, but it stung more than ever, knowing that even after she'd lost her brother, nobody even stopped to say hi or check up on her, it was just straight into gossiping about the neighbors and those disrespectful bastards across the street who weren't flying a flag for the holiday and family members who couldn't be there.

But Max never heard Billy's name come up even once, and not even in a respect to the dead boy and his grieving sister type of way, but rather, in the way that they just didn't want to acknowledge his existence. None of these people had come to his graduation in May of last year, or his funeral two months later.

Billy was a taboo that the Hargrove-Mayfields didn't dare taint their celebrations of freedom and justice with. The irony made Max sick to her stomach.

Or that was at least, until Neil couldn't help himself.

His words are slurring already, with an excuse to party he's on what Max would guess to be his fifth or sixth beer that afternoon, and someone just made the mistake of mentioning their own son, Billy and Max's third cousin or something, and it spurs Neil off on a tangent about his.

"That boy was always good for nothing anyways. It's almost the same now that he's dead, 'Cept maybe now I get some more quiet around the house."

Nobody knows what to do when he says that, there's a couple awkward laughs and one shocked gasp, that one was probably from her mother, but Max knows exactly what she wants to do.

What she wants is to watch Neil choking on his blood instead of her brother, his body being lowered into the ground instead of Billy's, and in the moment she feels like she could be the one to make that a reality, but instead she just stands abruptly, a plate of the food her mother worked so hard to prepare for them she'd been too queasy to eat falling off her knees to the grass, and she says everything she'd

bottled up for the past year.

“Don’t talk about Billy that way!

“Now, Maxine—“ Neil starts, but Max is livid, can’t hold back all the things she wished she had said before Billy died, when she got grounded after the funeral, when Neil started beating her, “No! I’m not going to let you do to me what you did to my brother! You don’t get to control me like you did him, it’s your fault that he’s dead!”

It’s her mother’s turn to try to stop her, slender hand covering her mouth painted red, “Maxine..”

“Stop trying to reason with me! I’m sick of pretending to be a family when I had to watch my own brother die! And I’m sick of being treated like I’m crazy for being the only one that cares about Billy!”

More than one person chimes in on that one, offended by the notion they don’t care about family, though it’s Neil that insists, in that faux calm, close to snapping voice of his, “We do care, Maxine. We’re all grieving in our own ways.”

She fires back, “Grieving what? The loss of your punching bag? You hated Billy! You don’t care that he’s dead, all that matters to you is having someone to hurt, and you no trouble adjusting to beating up on your wife and step-daughter instead!”

She catches a backhand to the face for that, and all the background chatter comes to a halt, Neil gritting out through his teeth, “Inside. Now.”

There are tears in her eyes that sting almost as much as the knuckle marks on her cheek, but Max feels like she won, getting her step dad all riled up in front of their family, she feels almost invincible, and she sneers all smug like and bitter, “I can’t go inside yet. I’m celebrating your service to our country, *dad*. You know, as a family.”

But when Neil’s face turns as red as the blood that dripped from his wife’s nose the night before and he stands from his chair and drags her inside by the wrist himself, she realizes that it wasn’t exactly a win.

And when her brain goes numb trying to focus on both the repeated slaps and punches that explode like firecrackers across her skin and the way Neil is yelling and lecturing her until his voice is raw, giving her the same lessons her brother had burned into the back of his mind, she feels like she's lost everything instead.

When she has to choke back her tears and apologize for embarrassing Neil and *making* him hit her as punishment, she realizes, this isn't a game that can be won or lost at all.

Max isn't allowed to go back outside to the party. That rule goes unspoken, but words aren't necessary with the way Neil storms off without another word, slamming the back door behind himself. She's slowly starting to figure out what the things her step father does instead of says mean.

She misses being allowed to be clueless, having someone to protect her or take what punishment she had earned. She wishes she wouldn't have asked so much of Billy though.

Her own room isn't safe anymore, what once had been the place she'd be ushered off to when Neil got bad had become more like a trap, the place Neil went to first when he was angry. Everything that had been hers felt wrong, so she goes to Billy's room and doesn't come out for the rest of the night. Even now that he's gone, he still kept her safe.

There's a welt on her face and fresh bruises forming everywhere, hot tears wetting her sunburnt cheeks and the pillows that smell like Billy, or at least used to before Susan decided his room needed cleaned and washed away every trace of her brother.

All night long there are fireworks going off, a big show put on by the city downtown has her shaking, unable to close her eyes for fear those distant explosions would take her back to the mall, bring back memories she'd never forget, and covering her ear with her hands.

The cracks and booms that shake her windows and her entire life, a headache and a heart break even stronger.

She tries her hardest not to think about Starcourt though, so instead

she thinks about how Billy would've been proud of her for standing up to Neil. He would've called her an idiot, but he would've cleaned up her scrapes and held her through the panic attack after, and he probably would've liked to see the person Max was becoming too.

That makes Max's heart hurt, the fact that he won't get to. She cries harder, and she feels so alone without Billy.

Some part of her knows that she isn't though. She isn't the only one that lost somebody last July.

Hawkins' cemetery was alive with flowers and wreaths and decoration, and more than anything the grieving. All of the victims had families, or in the case of the Holloway's where their whole family was killed, they had friends and neighbors in the tight knit community who remembered them. El was still grieving Hopper, and Max knew Billy had people like that too.

Billy was popular, his death had a huge impact on the younger population of the town, but not only that, he had his closest friends, Steve and Tommy and Carol and Nicole and Adam from the pool, and of course Heather couldn't be there, but those people were all keeping her brother alive.

As much as it felt like everyone was trying to forget him, they weren't, and that brought Max a little bit of hope.

Hope that Billy would be remembered for the things he did right, and who he was behind the boy he had to be to keep them safe.

Hope that with his memory kept in the hearts of so many, the burden of grief wouldn't fall solely on Max forever and make things a little easier.

Hope that the wound would someday heal, and she could look back on the time she did have with Billy, those seven too short years, with a smile on her face.

For now, she wraps herself in Billy's jacket and comforter, listening to his music to drown out the distant fireworks, and dreams of the day

when things won't be like this, when she can leave Hawkins and all it's bad memories and the "family" holding her back to live a life her brother would be proud of, a life that would honor his.

Max decides then with determination, flinching when a bright flash lights up her window, a loud echo through the quaint neighborhood, that she was going to do what Billy hadn't been able to and break the cycle.

Tomorrow, she'd tell the school counselor she'd been assigned when her depression was at its worst all about Neil Hargrove.